

# Nuclear fast track endangers citizens

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Lanny Sinkin

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The Nuclear Regulatory Commission is fast-tracking licensing for new nuclear power plants, stressing speed over health and safety. The public will be far less protected than in the past, at a time when seven nuclear reactors are planned for Texas.

The South Texas Project application is missing so much information that the NRC refuses to do further work on major parts of it. Yet citizens are expected to identify issues and file their petitions to intervene by Feb. 25.

The construction and operating license proceedings, formerly separated, will now be combined. There will be no construction record available to use in determining whether an operating license should be issued. The NRC essentially eliminated cross-examination of witnesses, a key process for bringing out the truth.

The first STP licensing is an excellent example of why the NRC rush and restrictions put the public at risk.

During those hearings, an inspector at the plant told intervenors about alleged intimidation directed against inspectors who tried to get necessary corrections during construction. From his experience, the inspector did not trust the NRC.

I took the allegations to the NRC regional office, which conducted an examination and found no violations. I then took the inspector to CBS's "60 Minutes." They ran a national story featuring the inspector and his allegations.

Then the NRC sent in a team from outside the region, ended up shutting down the plant for a lengthy period and issued an inspection report noting numerous violations.

Had the citizen intervenor not been in place, the inspector would never have come forward with his information, and an honest investigation would never have taken place.

Later, flaws in engineering appeared, creating still further licensing issues. The license was at risk.

The STP partners then brought in new companies to finish the project. The partners eventually recovered more than \$700 million in damages from the original contractor.

The intervenors' role in bringing the problems to light seriously embarrassed the NRC. The lengthy hearings that resulted heavily burdened the utilities. Ultimately, however, the intervenors fulfilled the true purpose of permitting public participation — safety had first priority.

The current fast track scheduling and highly restrictive hearing process are designed to prevent intervenor oversight, much to the detriment of public health and safety. Those who might have stood guard over the NRC and the utilities are now being prevented from taking up that position as new nuclear plants come forward.

The San Antonio City Council should protect the people by rejecting the proposed rate increase by CPS Energy that starts it down the STP path.

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*Lanny Sinkin, a native of San Antonio, is an attorney living in Hawaii who represented one of the intervenors during the licensing hearings for the existing units at the South Texas Project.*